

The benefits of participating in virtual learning spaces for adults overcoming isolation during COVID-19

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Abstract: The magnitude of the COVID-19 crisis is unprecedented; it has impacted millions of students around the world. Among these impacted students are participants in adult education. Adult education centres have engaged in a series of online activities that have enabled adults who had never used ICT resources before, to interact with other participants. In response to this challenge, this research provides scientific insight regarding the impact of the actions by one adult education centre in Spain, the participants' association Ágora, whose scope of responsibility is to service the entire neighbourhood of La Verneda (Barcelona). Its objective is to enable adults to acquire abilities and to develop initiative through participation in a broad and high-quality educational programme. Ágora offers the entire neighbourhood a range of cultural and educational activities. This article provides knowledge about how to help people minimize the negative consequences of confinement, and uses a communicative methodology to provide a dialogical re-creation of knowledge which enables researchers to contribute to dismantling myths and false assumptions in identifying the benefits adult education can provide to participants. The field work was carried out online through semi-structured interviews with a number of adult participants between the ages of 30 and 90 who were engaged in adult education activities. The research revealed that participation improved the individuals' situation by enabling them to overcome loneliness or isolation.

Keywords: Adult education; participation; ageing; isolation, COVID-19

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Introduction

The worldwide spread of the SARS-COV-2 virus has generated a global crisis impacting all levels (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2020; United Nations [UN], 2020). Internationally, in many respects, the population group most affected by the COVID-19 pandemic have been the elderly (Bonanad et al., 2020; Department of Health and Human Services [HHS], 2020; MWG 2020).

In addition to high mortality rates, another important consideration of the pandemic is the isolation that members of this age group experienced due to containment, social distancing, and community containment (Wilder-Smith and Freedman, 2020). The implementation of these measures resulted in a more sedentary lifestyle, reduced social relations, and forced solitude. These factors were compounded by the pandemic's psychosocial effects, namely: anxiety and depression, which are conditions that have a negative impact on the healthy ageing (Armitage and Nellums, 2020; WG, 2020).

In Spain, the virus has had a particularly severe impact (Inchausti et al., 2020; WHO, 2020). Spain is a country with one of the highest life expectancies in the world. With 19.4% of its population over the age 65, COVID-19 has had a devastating effect. It is estimated that in this pandemic, the age group of people over the age of 65 has accounted for more than 70% of the mortality (National Institute of Statistics [INE], 2020; GTM 2020). In addition, Spain's educational and social reality has also been severely affected by the coronavirus pandemic, which in southern Europe has been especially complex and virulent (Aznar-Sala, 2020).

Given this scenario, this article aims to provide scientific knowledge about the benefits of a response to the socio-educational challenge that this pandemic has presented mainly among the elderly. In this context, the adult education school La Verneda-Sant Martí (Barcelona-Spain) has historically carried out activities for the educational and social improvement of the whole community. During the time of the pandemic, this school developed different activities delivered in a virtual mode that were found to be beneficial for adults.

In this study, we wanted to determine whether participation in adult education activities has increased as a result of offering online learning opportunities, and whether this participation has to a degree alleviated the

feeling of isolation and loneliness that adults were experiencing during the pandemic.

To do so, the current state of play regarding the pandemic and adult education participation is examined. First, the educational impact that the pandemic has had in the educational field and, more specifically, adult education is described. Moreover, consistent with the scientific literature, an analysis of the participation in and use of ICTs by adults is carried out, as well as the consequences of the pandemic on social isolation, the specific ways in which these consequences were aggravated, and the health measures needed to curb the pandemic. For this purpose, a communicative methodology was used (Oliver, 2014; Gómez et al., 2019) and interviews were conducted by using a communicative approach. The results presented in this paper reveal the impact that the online activities proposed by the school have had on participating adults, and the benefits that the centre's virtual learning spaces have brought to the learners.

State of Play

Adult Educational Participation during the COVID-19 Pandemic

The impact of the pandemic has been far beyond the health field. With respect to education, the COVID-19 crisis has created significant havoc and difficulties that are of vital importance to address (Reimers and Schleicher, 2020). This pandemic has probably caused the greatest educational disruption of our generation and will affect the livelihoods and future of communities.

According to data from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO] Institute for Statistics (2020b), some 188 countries have been affected by the closure of educational institutions. This has meant that 1,058 million students have not been able to attend these countries' schools. In Spain, all educational centres, from early childhood centres to universities, closed on March 13, 2020. The next day, a nationwide state of alarm was declared, and the population was asked to remain confined to their homes (Roca et al., 2020).

As reported by UNESCO in its report "Adverse consequences of school closures", this closure has had serious consequences, such as an interruption of learning, increased dropout rates, and greater exposure to violence and social isolation (UNESCO, n.d.) [1].

A checklist developed by the OECD (2020) for an educational response during the COVID-19 pandemic proposed several different points. Some of the most relevant ones are the following: the development of a means of communication and schedules to maintain frequent contact with the different working groups and agents involved; the inclusion of online learning, as it provides the greatest versatility and opportunity for interaction; and an increase in communication and collaboration among students in order to foster mutual learning and well-being.

Using these three types of proposals to address the problems generated by the pandemic resulted in relevant educational improvements. A survey conducted by OECD (Reimers and Schleicher, 2020) reveals that "some unexpected positive educational outcomes of the changes caused by the crisis include the implementation of innovative technologies and other solutions and an increase in students' autonomy to manage their own learning" (p. 31). Similarly, a study by Harvard University (Shonkoff, 2020) revealed that prolonged social distance and supportive relationships are essential to strengthening resistance in the face of adversity. Thus, a priority for research has been to address the threats and negative impacts that isolation can have at the socio-educational level, especially the impact on the most vulnerable groups (Roca et al., 2020). These vulnerable groups include adult education individuals, because many resources available to these groups remain limited while social distancing practices continue (Boeren et al., 2020; Reimers and Schleicher, 2020).

Given this situation, UNESCO views adult learning and education as a means to help meet the main urgent economic, social and environmental challenges (Lopes and McKay, 2020; UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning [UIL], 2020). In line with this, in their sustainable development goals for 2030, lifelong learning is advocated as the fourth goal and also as an engine for social transformation and development (UIL, 2020; UN, 2015). Likewise, authors, such as Peter Jarvis (1985), who are historically referenced in adult education research, argue that maintaining the social fabric can be a method both for its liberation and development, as well as for its maintenance of the social system. In this sense, Jarvis emphasizes "the retention of stability in the social system at a time when many people do not have work to occupy their time and minds" (p. 147).

Adults, especially the elderly, face great challenges when dealing with technology. They may have physical or educational limitations in the use of ICT. However, they are a group that has shown a great interest in updated themselves within an information society, and they have the capacity to adapt to new forms of communication (de Jager et al., 2003; García and Heredia, 2017).

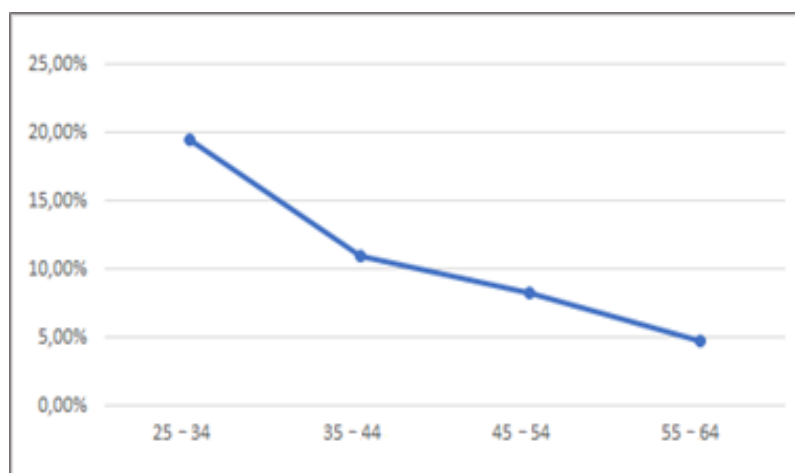
In addition, the use of ICT represents a method that for years has been increasingly necessary to reach the maximum number of people possible. In contrast, it can also generate new exclusion situations that could affect the groups and individuals who have no possibility of accessing ICT if it is not appropriately managed (Martínez-González, 2004). In fact, for professionals in the field of social intervention, ICT is an important tool that can be used to promote the connection between social and educational reality, to manage and enable the administration of their professional work, and to integrate the learning, communication and interaction processes of students in any community (Sampedro-Requena, 2015). The potential of ICT has already been demonstrated in its inclusion in the education of adolescent students with disabilities (Buitrago et al., 2016) or in the academic and professional training of inmates in prisons (Novo-Corti et al., 2011). In the case of adult education, ICT has proven to be an important communication opportunity that facilitates the integral social interaction for older people in the development of relationships that enhance their personal and social qualities, moving them away from personal isolation and facilitating their satisfaction and motivation (Martínez and Rodríguez-García, 2018).

Similarly, research is already underway on understanding how adult education is a key element both at the social level for containing the pandemic and at the individual level for improved physical and emotional well-being (Lopes and McKay, 2020). Therefore, the pandemic has once again highlighted the need for providing citizens with knowledge management and verified information that they can reflect and act on to protect their health and that of the rest of society (Legido-Quigley et al., 2020; Lopes and McKay, 2020; Pulido-Rodríguez et al., 2020).

Education and access to knowledge are key factors since, in the face of a health crisis such as the one we are currently experiencing, the poor and the elderly are the most affected (Human Rights Watch [HRW], 2020). People over sixty years old are particularly vulnerable, and as Lopes and McKay

(2020) point out that, "interventions for this group should be tailored to their risk profile and provide knowledge-generating responses to their specific need to increase self-protection, as well as provide the methods to do so" (p. 10). This evidence is especially relevant in Spain, given the impact that the pandemic has had on the elderly, a major age group in Spain. The phenomenon becomes even more pressing when the figures on adult participation shown in Figure 1 are taken into account. According to the 2018-2019 academic year data collected by the Ministry of Education and Vocational Training (2019), in Spain, there were 512,311 registrations in adult education, 230,026 in formal education and 282,285 in non-formal education. We can observe a decrease in the participation in training as the age of the adult increases.

Figure 1. Participation in education activities by age groups in 2018.



Source: Ministerio de Educación y Formación Profesional (2019)

If educational participation is lower at an older age, in the pandemic scenario, the influence of the increased isolation of adults living alone is even higher and has more complex consequences. In Europe, the percentage of the population between 25 and 64 years of age participating in education is 11.1%, which is a percentage slightly higher than that in Spain (10.5%) (Ministry of Education and Vocational Training, 2019b). Regarding the importance of continuing education, one of the key characteristics of the Spanish adult population is that in 2019, 38.7% of the population had an educational level lower than the second stage of secondary education, while the level in Catalonia was slightly higher (36.3%) (Ministry of Education and Vocational Training, 2019b).

Likewise, in Spain, an ageing index of 125.79% has been reached (INE, 2020), demanding social, economic and health solutions that enable older adults to have both the best possible quality of life and a full inclusion in society (Mendes, 2013).

For this reason, the concept of "active ageing" has now emerged. According to the WHO, the coinage of this term aims to focus the design of policies and interventions on promoting an ageing adaptation based on the continuous participation of adults in social, economic, cultural, spiritual and civic affairs rather than on a person's ability to be physically active or continue working (WHO, 2002).

Thus, authors such as Manninen et al. (2011) show how the educational participation of adults reinforces greater social and political confidence, generates more intense cultural participation and, in addition, results in better health and employability. Moreover, adult participation in education has a long history and has been given significant recognition, given the important benefits it brings to both adults and society. In the 1960s, Freire (1968) developed a proposal for education that was based on dialogical action and included the entire educational community in the construction of reality (students, families, neighbourhood entities, etc.) (Flecha and Puigvert, 1998). Within this framework, the research group Community of Researchers in Excellence for All [CREA] [2] developed the concept of dialogical learning initiated by Flecha (1997). Under this concept, which was based on a social science communicative perspective, the interactions between people created a social reality. In this way, the importance of adult participation in education was recognized, especially in the case of the most vulnerable groups (Girbés-Peco et al., 2019; Iñiguez-Berrozpe et al., 2020).

Isolation and unwanted loneliness in the elderly

There is ample evidence showing how social isolation is linked to an increased risk of early mortality and worsening health (Cacioppo, Cacioppo, Capitanio, et al., 2015; Cacioppo, Cacioppo, Cole, et al., 2015; Hawkey and Cacioppo, 2003, 2010; Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015; Shankar et al., 2011). In particular, social isolation is also linked to higher mortality in older men and women (Cornwell and Waite, 2009; Steptoe et al., 2013). Thus, loneliness in older people is a global public health problem because of its serious impact on the quality of life (Chalise et al., 2007; Smith, 2012; Theeke, 2010; Thurston

and Kubzansky, 2009). Major international health institutions have recognized the importance of addressing social isolation and loneliness in order to improve the well-being and quality of life of older people (Cattan et al., 2005; Department of Health and Social Care, 1999; WHO, 2002). In fact, some authors also consider loneliness as an epidemic (Newson, 2006; Shearer and Davidhizar, 1999; Smith, 2012).

In old age, isolation and loneliness are particularly significant problems because of factors such as the loss of a spouse, friends, income, and health (Balandin et al., 2006). In addition, ageing can lead to a loss of physical and relational skills, limiting the individuals' participation in everyday activities. Thus, meaningful social interactions are an integral element of successful ageing (Smith, 2012). Studies show the fundamental importance of friendly relationships in old age, as these relationships represent an essential source of support (Eshbaugh, 2009). Along this line, the research conducted by Cattan et al. (2005), one of the most cited international studies on loneliness in old age, shows that there are effective interventions to prevent loneliness. These interventions comprise education and social activities aimed at specific groups of people. Thus, the participation of adults in education can be considered a primary tool for increasing their inclusion and involvement in political, communicational and social actions (Iñiguez-Berrozpe et al., 2020).

This review reveals that adults have a high potential for participation and that this potential represents important opportunities at the individual and collective level. For this reason, it is essential to carry out research that will deepen the understanding of those actions that can end isolation and improve older adults' educational involvement, especially at a stage of life in which great damage has been caused. Some of these liabilities can be transformed into opportunities. In the words of Rita Levi-Montalcini, (1998), "The individual, at the end of his journey, in full possession of his intellectual faculties, can enjoy what life has to offer and a future that does not belong to him". (p. 169).

Methodology

This research uses a communicative methodology that, based on an egalitarian dialogue with the participants of the research, allows for an intersubjective creation of knowledge that provides a deeper and more precise understanding of the studied reality and its transformative potential (Gómez et al., 2012). This analysis starts through the use of a communicative

methodological approach, in which all people have language and action capacity (Oliver, 2014; Gómez et al., 2019). The subjects and systems are not only fundamental but also mutually necessary for the benefit of dialogical research (Bryman and Teevan, 2005). Different studies have demonstrated the suitability of this methodology when investigating vulnerable groups, as well as the social impact that this methodology produces (Gómez et al., 2011; European Commission, 2011; Puigvert et al., 2012; Flecha and Soler, 2014; Gómez, 2017; Díez-Palomar et al., 2018).

Following the communicative methodology, in this line of research, data collection techniques were oriented not only to collect the experiences and perceptions of individuals but also to discuss with them these experiences and perceptions in light of previous scientific knowledge on the subject. Following Stake (2006), a case study was selected based on the information it could provide about the topic explored, namely, the adult education participation improvement resulting from the offering of online activities by a particular adult centre, and how this participation can influence the isolation and feeling of loneliness in adults. In this sense, the case study was important in providing information on this topic.

The case study is a "bounded system" (Stake, 1998, p. 16); that is, it is understood as the interest in a single individual case, regardless of whether the case represents a person, a programme, a service or a centre. This research seeks to deepen the understanding of the experience of adult school participation in the context of confinement by COVID-19. To this end, this study delves into the impact of some actions carried out in Spain by an adult education centre, the Adult Education School of Verneda-St. Martí (Barcelona), and the association of the *Ágora* participants belonging to this centre.

This school was founded in 1978 in a humble neighbourhood on the outskirts of Barcelona at a time of high educational, social and political demand. The school was set up with the idea of being a school created for everyone. Originally beginning with 15 people, the school currently serves more than 1,600 individuals and has a waiting list of hundreds of people. Since its origin, the school has been growing and enriching itself with a multitude of people participating in its initiatives. An essential characteristic of the training centre is that all action is nourished by equal dialogue (Folch, 2015). The key to its success is democratic organization and functioning. Currently, this

school is an international reference point for transformation because of its communicative character that transcends the community (Sánchez-Aroca, 1999; Aubert et al., 2016). Thus, the choice to conduct research at the La Verneda Adult School is due to the important role the centre may have played in curbing the impact of isolation by COVID-19 when many elderly people have been left alone during the state of alarm implemented by the Spanish Government.

Before the pandemic, the school provided a wide range of activities, such as basic training, university access, language learning, computer science education, and chat rooms, with different timetables, making participation as easy as possible. After March 11, 2020, because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the school had to close. However, using the words of Paulo Freire (1997), the school's personnel asked themselves how to "transform difficulties into possibilities". Only one week later, they decided to keep the school alive. With the help of the educational community and under the leadership of the professional team, the centre moved from face-to-face training spaces to virtual spaces. This change was made possible through the solidarity of the neighbourhood and the support of the school for those people who did not have technological resources or who were less knowledgeable regarding ICT use to be able to connect online. Currently, the school has started providing virtual courses, offering most of the activities that were carried out before the pandemic online and providing technical support for anyone who wants to participate.

Sample

The research participants included six women and one man. During the confinement caused by the pandemic, these individuals all participated in online activities at the La Verneda Adult School. To choose these people, we connected with the centre's coordinators, who provided us with the volunteers, their phone numbers and contact information. We consulted with the participants and asked them if they were willing to participate in the research. We presented to them the researchers and the objective of the research. The qualitative methodology that was to be carried out aimed more at obtaining qualitative information about the object of the study than at generalizing the study's results. Therefore, we used an informal selection process by which individuals who could contribute information were chosen as volunteer subjects.

The activities in which they participated included Spanish classes for immigrants, dialogical literary gatherings (reading books of the best works of world literature) [3], etc. The participants' characteristics were as follows:

Table I. People participating in the study.

Pseudonym	Age	Sex	Activity	Residence in Barcelona	Born in
Consuelo	59	F	Gatherings	Sant Martí [4] Barcelona	Ávila (SP)
Ángela	74	F	Gatherings	Sant Martí. Barcelona	Sevilla (SP)
Adriana	82	F	Gatherings	El Besós i El Maresme [5]	Castellón de la Plana (SP)
Judith	74	F	Gatherings	Sant Martí. Barcelona	Zaragoza (SP)
Rebeca	56	F	Gatherings	Sant Martí. Barcelona	Sevilla (SP)
Abbas	34	M	Spanish classes	Barceloneta. Barcelona	Marruecos
Rosario	41	F	English classes	Sant Martí. Barcelona	Bolivia

Ethical criteria were also taken into account: all participants were informed about the objective of the research and for what purpose it would be carried out. They were contacted through the school's reference persons and asked for their explicit consent to voluntary participate. They were assured of complete confidentiality, and their original names were replaced by pseudonyms.

The research technique used to carry out the fieldwork was the interview for which a communicative approach was used. Consistent with the communicative methodology, to generate new scientific knowledge, this approach requires the creation of spaces in which equal dialogue is guaranteed regarding the experience and knowledge provided by the person participating in the study and the research provided by the researcher (Gómez, 2017; Gómez et al., 2019; Redondo-Sama et al., 2020).

Therefore, between July 13, 2020 and July 20, 2020, seven online interviews were conducted through the applications Zoom and WhatsApp at convenient times for the participants. The duration of all the interviews was between thirty minutes and one hour, during which time, the researcher and the adult education participant interacted and answered open questions. A dialogue was held based on questions focusing on issues such as the individual's participation in courses during the confinement; the individuals knowledge of connecting through the Zoom app or through other ways, such as with the computer or cell phone, and a determination of whether this was the first time they had connected this way; the effect of the online activities on enabling them to participate more in the school than they had before; and the influence of the online activities on their experience with confinement. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed textually for later analysis. These interviews were analysed to determine the individuals' assessment of virtual participation and how this participation affected the situations of isolation or loneliness due to COVID-19.

The analysis of the data was made from two categories based on the following fundamental aspects: improving participation and overcoming isolation. Within these categories, subcategories were established to make the analysis as precise as possible. For the improvement of participation, three subcategories were established: increased participation, learning to connect, and potential benefits from connecting (Table 2). The subcategories of overcoming isolation were the following: companionship; relationship aid; new relationships; and external relations (Table 3).

Table 2: The improvement in participation

Subcategory	Description
Increased participation	The increase in attendance for the activities offered online by the La Verneda-Sant Martí Adult School
Learning to connect	The increase in the skills and abilities required for the online connection on different platforms.
Benefits from connecting	The improvements and benefits due to online versus face-to-face activities

Table 3: Overcoming isolation

Subcategory	Description
Companionship	Experiencing relief from the feeling of loneliness and isolation due to the connections generated from the school
Relationship aid	Facilitating cooperation and support between participants of the school's online activities
New relationships	Getting to know and establish relationships with new people in the school environment
External relations	Continuing or establishing links by learning to make online connections

The analysis was conducted through the transcription of the interviews, the identification of the barriers that prevent the transformation from the exclusionary dimension perspective, and through the determination of the ways to overcome the barriers from the transformative dimension perspective. Each subcategory gave rise to one of these dimensions. The categories were identified and matched with the dimensions.

Table 4. Analysis Table

Dimension	Improving participation			Overcoming isolation			
	Increased participation	Learning to connect	Benefits from connecting	Companionship	Relationship aid	New relationships	External relations
Exclusionary	1	3	5	7	9	11	13
Transformative	2	4	6	8	10	12	14

Direct quotes from the participants are provided to show evidence related to the main objective of this research. Therefore, in structuring the results of the analysis, only those transforming elements that facilitate the improvement in participation and the overcoming of isolation have been taken into consideration.

Results

The findings presented in this study are in contrast to the current state of the art analyses. The results presented are related to the two aims of the study: the participation in virtual learning spaces and the effect of participation on feelings of isolation and undesired loneliness.

The participation of adults in virtual learning spaces

First, we studied how adult participation has evolved during the pandemic. Despite the difficulties derived from COVID-19 (Aznar Sala, 2020) and the consequent closure of schools, the La Verneda-Sant Martí Adult School continued to carry out activities with the participants. As established by the main guidelines of international organizations, such as UNESCO (n.d.) [6] or the OECD (Reimers and Schleicher, 2020), contact with groups was continued, and methods of contact and online learning were developed.

First, most of the people interviewed stated that they had participated more in online activities during confinement than they had previously done in person. This may present an opportunity to change the low educational participation by adults in the data in Spain (Ministerio de Educación y Formación Profesional, 2019a):

Look, sometimes I have participated in school more than before, every day more, I told a classmate: We see each other more than before! (Ángeles).

Yes, I used to be unable to do so because of work, only the Monday night meeting and I always arrived late, (...) but I like it, so I'm going. (...) But because of that, now I have participated in more things (Rebeca).

As pointed out in the OECD study (Reimers and Schleicher, 2020), due to the possibilities offered by this method, going online has increased adult participation. In fact, the authors explained how being online could allow the connection to people with whom no such connection would have been achieved in person. This coincides with the ideas of García and Heredia (2017) and Jager et al. (2003), who showed how the use of ICT resources and social networks made older people feel more included and caused them to participate more in the activities.

Likewise, the participants' perceptions about the use of ICT to connect with others reflects the importance of technology for facilitating social inclusion, as has already been referenced by researchers in this same field (Martínez-González, 2004; Martínez and Rodríguez-García, 2018; Novo-Corti et al., 2011; Sampedro-Requena, 2015). A respondent commented as follows:

It's very interesting, if you could keep doing it, because there are older people who can't get out. Now in the eight o'clock talk, now at the last minute, there are people who were already getting older and were not going (Judith).

In the same vein, during the process of implementation of the activities, several participants expressed having learned to connect through online methods. They explain how the support provided by the school staff and by other participants were especially important for them, since these individuals followed the school's maxim of not leaving anyone behind. We can see how it was fundamental that the school followed the methods for adults proposed by Freire (1968) and Flecha (1997), who found that the contribution and interaction between all the participants is valued. This is how Judith explains it:

No, I didn't know how to make video calls; they taught me with a lot of patience because the truth is that it cost me a little, but well, it's the school's rule "everything is learned if you put your mind to it". At the beginning, I was a little bit worried, but M. (a professional of the school) helped me a lot because, well, I gave him a lot of trouble because he didn't clarify anything.

Additionally, following the guideline stating that the maximum possible number of people should connect, the methods were agreed upon and were developed based on the initiative of the participants themselves, ensuring that the methods as accessible as possible and enabling better dialogue:

I realized that people had stopped doing the discussions; we were about 24 people, who suddenly were left with nothing, like orphans of that which gave us so much. So, M., a teacher from Verneda, sent me voice audios through WhatsApp, and I said: well, I could propose doing the discussion through voice audios, because we all didn't have the tools to be able to connect. We thought that voice audio would be easier, since almost everyone has it. Whoever does not want to enter, should not enter, but for me it was very important that no one was excluded from the discussion. I proposed it, we

tried it and it was a success. The success was so great that when we finished the book by Pérez Galdós, the compañeras said: we're going on! (Adriana).

In this way, learning to connect and participate in school activities provided important benefits for the participants (Boeren et al., 2020). Allowing the participants to counteract the pandemic's obstacles to active ageing (Armitage and Nellums, 2020; WG 2020), this dynamic enabled the participants to be more active and to benefit from educational participation. It also fostered better inclusion and the participants' social confidence (Manninen et al., 2011):

I always recommend it. And once we've been out there (going out in the street), oh, I have to connect, I can't make it, I have a meeting. (...) For me it's an incentive, the fact of reading the book and then commenting on it on Saturday (Rosario).

These findings confirm Rita Levi-Montalcini's proposal in which she states that (we must live) making plans for the time we have left, regardless of whether it is a day, a month or several years, with the hope of being able to carry out some projects that we had not been able to do in our youthful years (1998: p. 18)

Effects of Virtual Participation on Isolation by Household Confinement

All the participants said that being able to participate in the program activities offered online by the school also helped them to feel more accompanied and to overcome loneliness. Due to the initiatives of the participants themselves and the centre, even people who were hospitalized and therefore isolated could establish contact. This fact represents an essential element: companionship and social interactions are key factors for success in ageing (Smith, 2012). Two respondents commented as follows:

Above all, older people are alone. I am also older, but there are much older people, and they said that, it was a very nice experience because through the application you were in contact, you did not feel so alone and it was a way to be able to interact with other people, since you could not do it otherwise (Remedios).

I'm always alone, in the hospital, alone in the room, you know, bored, not talking to anyone. When my partner is going to zoom in, I tell him: Come on,

come on, come on, send it to me, man. I'm very happy with the class, you know, because I'm always alone (Abbas).

One of the main aspects that the participants pointed out in relation to improving the feeling of loneliness and isolation was the creation of helping relationships through which they managed to learn together and overcome the difficulties of connecting. Friendly relationships, especially those related to learning, represent a primary source of support and are the sources most recognized in the international literature (Cattan et al., 2005; Eshbaugh, 2009). This finding is also consistent with those demonstrated by Lopes and McKay (2020) regarding the social and emotional benefits of education and social relationships for adults during the COVID-19 pandemic. Two participants expressed the following:

Whenever there was a problem, they always helped me a lot. My classmates who had a problem, the school would call them, tell them to play here, play there, that they were concerned about getting people to connect, that if they couldn't connect, that it wasn't because of a technical problem (Rebeca).

I have a classmate who's in class too, when I don't have a password to connect, he sends me the password (Abbas).

Although it seemed that being confined to their home would prevent the adults from meeting other people or keeping in touch, due to being online, they were given the opportunity to establish new relationships that will continue over time and that would not have been possible in the face-to-face mode (Cattan et al., 2005). Some respondents commented as follows:

It has helped me to relate to other people, to have respect, to have empathy, to be assertive, to give your opinion and to respect the opinion of others if I do not agree. (...). Look, from the previous discussion, they are people from the neighbourhood that I didn't know at all, I didn't have to know them. But when you're at the discussion, and you see yourself walking down the street, you say hello. (...) It's nice, because what we're doing is neighbourly (Consuelo).

Note that I do not know them personally, and through this application, I know them already, which is something curious, how it gives you so much to interact with people without knowing them. Because through what they think, when sometimes we make the comments, before the person speaks, more or less you knew what he was going to say, it was very curious, because you

are already seeing a little way of thinking of each one, which does not mean that they are more right or less, but you know more or less how that person is, and it is very enriching (Rosario).

In addition to facilitating the relationships with the other participants in the school, the learning acquired for participation in the activities was described by the interviewees as having enabled them to maintain relationships and to connect online with other people in their environment outside the school. Thus, they were able to break a particularly serious barrier: unwanted loneliness in old age, which is pressing due to the loss of the older adults' usual relationships (Balandin et al., 2006). Two respondents provided the following comments:

I live alone. Now, it is useful for the family to speak through WhatsApp, I connect, I see them. For me it's very important, technologies for me, look, now I'm connecting with a friend from Mexico, who sometimes travelled with us around, and hey, you know how cool it is to be able to see you, they serve me, technologies serve me a lot. It's serving me a lot, and I'm giving it a value that I didn't give it before (Adriana).

Now I can connect with my family from Google Duo. Lately with Adriana, it was very difficult, and she was very cabezona; in the end, we connected by mobile (...). The other day I was very happy because she was the one who made a video call to me and I was very happy because I could already see it on the tablet (Angela).

Thus, the pursuit of a shared objective (learning English or Spanish; commenting on books of world literature) creates a space for a human relationship that not only affects the time of the connection but also extends to the preparation of classes or reading the texts that are commented upon. At the same time, technical learning becomes a tool that can be applied to other relationships beyond the school and that fosters the overcoming of loneliness by creating new or maintaining old relationships.

From the analysis of the participants' responses, it has been possible to demonstrate that through the online activities organized by the La Verneda-Sant Martí Adult School, participation has been increased and improved, and along with this improvement, isolation has been combated, since new relationships have been maintained and generated; in addition, the lessons learned have helped individuals to connect with people outside the school.

In short, both the results related to acquiring knowledge and overcoming loneliness are in line with other findings, for example, the contributions of Pascual-Leone et al. (2019) to the relationship between social interaction and cognitive functioning:

Greater social interaction is associated with better cognitive functioning. A simple informal conversation does not bring as many benefits as more cooperative interactions aimed at solving complex problems (2019, p. 190).

Conclusions

In this article, we have studied the impact of the online actions carried out by the La Verneda-St. Martí Adult School during the period of confinement caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, the findings reveal that participation improved as a result of the online activities offered by the School of Adult Persons La Verneda - Sant Martí and that this participation has helped participating adults overcome feelings of isolation and a sense of loneliness.

Based on the knowledge developed by the participants in the research and the research staff, it has been possible to verify how, in general, participation has increased due to the use of online methods and how these methods have even enabled people who were hospitalised, people with little mobility, or those who have in-person learning difficulties, due, for example, to their work situation, to participate. The participants describe how the whole process of organization and participation has been agreed upon and cooperated with by all the agents of the school and how they have sought at all times to guarantee freedom and inclusion, which has contributed to the school's success.

With respect to improving the participants' sense of isolation and unwanted solitude, we can see in the words of the participants how companionship provided in different forms has enabled them to overcome this feeling. The relationships that already existed have been maintained, and their friendships have been preserved. The participants even expressed how they have established new relationships that would not have been created if it were not for the online activities. This has created a larger community, facilitating the establishment of relationships that have made it possible for the adults to continue to participate and grow. In addition, due to what they have learned

from both the professional team and from their peers, these adults have been able to connect with people outside the school, for example, their families or friends.

In this way, one can see how improving participation and overcoming isolation are interrelated. Friendship and support relationships have been made possible by online connections and, in turn, by the fact that people continue to participate through support and relationships with the school.

In short, it is evident that the online activities coordinated from the La Verneda-St. Martí Adult School have had a positive impact on the lives of the participants. This evidence is intended to verify that people are never too old to learn how to use ICT and that it is possible for them to participate online if they have the necessary support from educational centres. Likewise, among the older generations and even those individuals with difficulties, the adults' access to virtual learning may to a certain extent contribute to overcoming the feelings of loneliness caused by the pandemic.

This research hopes to be a first approach to suggesting future actions in the context of a pandemic, in order to overcome the difficulties generated by the pandemic, as well as the actions to improve adult education, as it has been demonstrated that adult education is a fundamental area of concern for the whole of society. For this reason, for future research, it is proposed that further in-depth studies should be conducted to identify those socio-educational actions that represent successful alternatives that can be pursued in the face of the present and future limitations caused by pandemics similar to COVID-19.

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Endnotes

- [1] <https://es.unesco.org/node/320395>
- [2] <http://crea.ub.edu/index/?lang=es>
- [3] <https://comunidadesdeaprendizaje.net/actuaciones-de-exito/tertulias-literarias-dialogicas/>
- [4] Sant Martí, minimum income neighbourhood on the edge of Barcelona, (57 Family Income Index) Source: Ayuntamiento de Barcelona (2018) <https://ajuntament.barcelona.cat/barcelonaeconomia/ca/renda-familiar/renda-familiar/distribucio-territorial-de-la-renda-familiar-disponible-capita>
- [5] 2 El Besòs i El Maresme, a neighbourhood with a minimum income on the edge of Barcelona (60,4 Family Income Index) Source: Ayuntamiento de Barcelona (2018) <https://ajuntament.barcelona.cat/barcelonaeconomia/ca/renda-familiar/renda-familiar/distribucio-territorial-de-la-renda-familiar-disponible-capita>
- [6] <https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse>

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